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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS:

A PAPER

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OF THE

CITY OF WASHINGTON, D. C.,

APRIL 18, A. D. 1892,

BY

MARTIN F. MORRIS, LL.D.

WASHINGTON, D. C.:
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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Separated from each other by intervals of about fifteen centuries each, three great events stand out prominent beyond all others in human history. About fifteen centuries after the first appearance of civilization on the Plains of Shinar, the great movement occurred which is known to us as the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the first protest of monotheistic truth and republican principle against the corruptions of polytheism and the licentiousness of arbitrary monarchy, and which eventuated in the establishment of a government of law in opposition to the governments of the sword which then dominated the world. About fifteen centuries later, the Divine Teacher of Nazareth preached the new Dispensation of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and soon by his preaching revolutionized the world. Again, fifteen centuries later still, when Christian truth and Christian faith had almost grown faint in their long contest of a thousand years with the superstitions of Odinism and the fanaticism of the false prophet of Arabia, when Gothic feudalism and Mohammedan intolerance had almost crushed out human freedom from the earth, the hopes of the human race were quickened into a new life by the discovery of a New World. These three great events wonderfully supplement each other in the Divine co-ordination of human history, and in the development of human civilization.

Monotheism and republicanism were the concurrent and necessarily connected outgrowth of the Israelite rebellion against Egypt. These two were likewise the essential elements of Christianity, and these two finally determined the exodus from the Old World to the New that made of the New World the promised land which bigotry had blotted from the map of the Eastern Continent. By Moses was established, or restored, the reign of law. It was the purpose of the religion promulgated by the Crucified Nazarene to free the human mind from the fetters that ignorance and tyranny had imposed upon it. It is not too much to say, that to the splendid achievement of Christopher Columbus we are indebted for the fairest field on which the law may reign supreme, and freedom find its holiest home.

Only by those who are familiar with the history of the long and desperate struggle between the cause of human freedom and the infamous system of feudalism with which the Goths and Vandals and their cognate barbarians had sought to fetter the free thought of Europe; and by those who are familiar at the same time with the magnitude of the disaster which overwhelmed Asia when the fanatics of Arabia and the hideous hordes of Turkestan destroyed the civilizations of Antioch and Persepolis, can the relief be fully appreciated that was brought to the human race by the exploit of Columbus. Columbus was an ardent Christian and an equally ardent republican. He came of a race that had been Christian and republican for ages. The republican cities of Italy had ever been the stout defenders of the cause of human liberty against Gothic tyranny and Arab fanaticism. In the land of Dante and Petrarch, of "blind old Dandolo" and heroic Andrea Doria, of ill-fated Rienzi and the martyred Savonarola, liberty had found a home, while

robber barons and degraded serfs held almost all the rest of Europe, while Saxon and Suabian contended for empire in Germany, and feudalism held high carnival in France, and brutal Plantagenet and unprincipled York and irresolute Lancaster laid England waste with their savage disputes for a crown. In the republican cities of Italy was kept alive not only the spirit of freedom, but its ever concomitant spirit of enterprise; and their adventurous merchants and daring navigators not only sought the golden gardens of the Hesperides in the West, but likewise from time to time turned their wistful eyes and longing hearts to the primal home of our race by the amber portals of the morning sun. By the republican cities of Italy the most strenuous efforts were made to keep open the intercourse between Asia and Europe, between the east and the west, that seems to have been ever necessary in order to prevent the nations from wholly forgetting the great doctrine of the brotherhood of man, first proclaimed upon Sinai and reiterated upon Calvary.

Mohammedanism had planted itself an almost adamantine barrier in the way of this intercourse. It had closed the Nile and the Red Sea to the commerce of Europe. It had destroyed Baalbec and Palmyra, and the great caravan routes through Asia. Like a vampire it had sucked out the life-blood of the Byzantine and Zoroastrian civilizations; and the Crusades had broken in vain against its barriers. The Ishmaelite ruffians from the deserts of Arabia had well supplemented in the East the systematic attack upon civilization conducted in the West by the robber barons and their lawless feudal chiefs. The republican cities of Italy, and chief among them Venice and Genoa, while beating back the feudalism of the North from their borders, at the same time sought to circumvent Mohammedanism and to reopen the way to the East.

In the thirteenth century rumors reached Europe of a powerful Asiatic prince somewhere beyond the regions ruled by Mohammedanism, an enemy of that politico-religious system and a friend of Christianity. He was sometimes even represented as a priest, and designated by the name of Prester John, or the Priest-King John. We now know him to have been an imaginary personage; but there was foundation for the belief in him from the fact of the great similarity of Buddhism to Christianity, and from the fact that in Thibet a priest-king, the Grand Lama, reigned; and from the further fact that just then had arisen in Mongolia the great conqueror, Jenghis Khan, who, with his sons and successors, proved a powerful foe to the domination of the Arabian religion.

The imagination of Europe was aflame to open communication with Prester John; and the republic of Venice sent the celebrated Marco Polo as its ambassador to the great Oriental potentate. By way of the Black Sea and the Caspian, Marco Polo, surmounting difficulties the most arduous, penetrated into the heart of Asia, and finally found his way, not to the court of the mythical Prester John, but to that of the magnificent Kublai Khan, grandson of the famous Jenghis, at Cambalu or Pekin. Kublai Khan ruled the largest and most populous empire the world has ever known. Marco Polo was well received by him, and was induced to enter into the service of the Mongolian Empire, in which he attained the highest dignities and remained for twenty-five years. He was then sent by Kublai Khan on an embassy to Persia; and the adventurous Venetian, instead of crossing the vast intervening mountains and deserts, boldly essayed to reach Persia by sea. Embarking from one of the ports of China or Cathay, he passed through the Chinese Sea and the Straits of Mal-

acca and, crossing the Indian Ocean, doubled Cape Comorin, skirted the shores of Hindustan and Gedrosia, entered the Persian Gulf, and cast anchor at last in the Euphrates—a most daring and remarkable voyage when we consider the time of its occurrence and the circumstances under which it was made. From Persia the brilliant adventurer found his way back to his native Venice, after an absence of nearly thirty years. He wrote a narrative of his adventures in the East, which was long regarded merely as a traveller's romance, but which we now know to have been true even to the minutest detail.

I have dwelt on the story of Marco Polo, because its influence on the history of Columbus was very great. The accounts brought to Europe by Marco Polo of the power and greatness of the Mongolian emperors, of the marvellous wealth of Cipango and Cathay—the names by which he designated Japan and China—and most of all, of that strange religion of the East, Buddhism, redoubled the desire of the ardent spirits of the Mediterranean to reach the Orient. Genoa was aroused to emulate the success of Venice. Moreover, the Renaissance was breaking upon Europe; literature revived; the dreams of Plato were dreamed again under the shadow of the Alps and the Appennines. Toscanelli renewed the theory of the sphericity of the earth that had been broached two thousand years before by Pythagoras at Crotona. Humanity was striving more earnestly than ever before to break the fetters of feudal restraint. And Christopher Columbus came at last divinely commissioned to clothe the world's nascent idealities in realism.

He, too, would reach Cipango and Cathay, and bring them into communication with Europe. He proclaimed the earth to be a globe; previously it had

been commonly believed to be a vast plain; and he would span that globe, and come out upon the east coast of Asia by sailing westward from Europe. He would carry the light of Christianity and European civilization to the vast regions which, with prophetic insight, he believed to extend south and east from the Continent of Asia; and he would bring the wealth of the Indies to the shores of Europe through the gates of the setting sun and not by the portals of the rising day.

No doubt Columbus was familiar with much of the legendary lore connected with the lost Island of Atlantis, with the Irish story of St. Brendan's Isle, and the story of the mythical voyage of the mythical Prince Madoc; and he seems to have sailed to Iceland, and to have become acquainted there with the adventurous voyages of the Norsemen along the shores of Arctic seas to Greenland and Vineland; and the vague and misty reminiscences that had come down from antiquity of the wonderful maritime enterprises conducted by Carthage and Phœnicia in the days of their greatness to the west of the Straits of Gades or Gibraltar, still lingered along the shores of the Mediterranean. And it may be that he had read those remarkably prophetic lines in the younger Seneca's "Tragedy of Medea," in which the Roman dramatist strangely anticipated the discovery of America nearly fourteen hundred years before the event:

> "Venient annis saecula seris,
> Quibus Oceanus vincula rerum,
> Laxet, et ingens pateat tellus,
> Tethysque novos detegat orbes,
> Nec erit terris ultima Thule."

Which, for the benefit of those of my auditors whose classical readings may have become indistinct amid the engrossing cares of daily life, I have taken the liberty to paraphrase as follows:

"When later years o'er earth have rolled,
Ocean shall nature's bonds unfold,
And far beyond the Western Sea
New worlds discover; then no more,
Upon the broad Atlantic shore,
The last of lands shall Thule be."

But whatever influence these legends and reminiscences may have had upon the age in which Columbus lived, and however adroitly he may have used them to establish the plausibility of his theories, there is no doubt that his own mind rested for the truth of those theories on a basis of scientific truth and a truly philosophic insight into the true system of nature and of nature's laws.

The great enterprise which he projected was beyond the power of unaided individual action. It required the resources of a nation and the sanction of organized authority to carry it into effect. But to the nation that would undertake it he promised power, and glory, and undying fame.

To his own native city he first proposed that Genoa should be that nation. But Genoa hesitated—hesitated too long. Venice, Portugal, Florence, France, England, were appealed to in succession; and all appeals were vain. For eighteen long years he struggled with opposition, adversity, almost despair. Every school-boy knows the story—the story of persistent effort, humiliation, and failure—and of yet more persistent faith, rising superior to all failure, in the mission which he preached. And every school-boy knows how, at last, under the walls of romantic Granada, while the last death-struggle was waged by the advancing hosts of Castille and Aragon against the hated Moslem, in sight of the Alhambra, over which yet floated the flag of Abdallah and gleamed the Crescent of Islam, the great Genoese met a soul as

lofty as his own, one who could enter into the spirit of his grand conception and sympathize with his heroic aspirations, one who could lead in person a desperate charge of mail-clad men, where hostile spears were thickest and hostile cannon thundered their deadliest volleys, and yet was the most womanly of women—the beautiful, the gifted, the heroic Isabella, Queen of Castille and Leon.

No nobler woman ever sat upon a throne than Isabella the Catholic. She had found Spain rent by civil factions and divided into petty sovereignties. She made of those petty sovereignties a nation, without destroying their liberties or impairing their independent existence. She had found the hereditary and relentless foes of Spain, the hated alien race of the Moors from Africa, still intrenched amid the fastnesses of the Sierra Nevada, still supreme over Spain's most beautiful province, Andalusia; and she never rested until the last of those foes had departed from Granada, and her own proud banner floated in triumph over a re-united country. She led her armies in person; and no enterprise was too daring for her which seemed to be for the good of Spain. When her too cautious or too calculating husband hesitated or would have turned back, she never shrunk from difficulty or danger. She laid siege to Granada when Ferdinand of Aragon counselled postponement of that desperate enterprise. Rampart after rampart, and fortress after fortress, she carried by storm when his slower nature or less resolute spirit would have preferred the more sluggish operation of siege or circumvallation. And yet a more devoted wife, a more devoted mother, a more lovely woman, there never lived than Isabella of Castille. History has not often manifested in any woman, never in any other woman that has occupied a throne, a nobler combination of great

and good qualities with fewer weaknesses than were found in this one who, above all other women that ever lived, held in her hands the destinies of the human race. For upon her decision under heaven it depended whether America was to be or not—whether the current of human history was to be turned back and dammed within the sluggish canals of feudal despotism forever, or whether humanity was to receive new life in a new world.

The decision could not have been in nobler, wiser, or better hands. Fortunately, while such a seat of learning as the University of Salamanca rejected the scheme of Columbus as visionary and impracticable, the monks of the Convent of La Rabida had become his enthusiastic advocates. Juan Perez, prior of La Rabida, had been the confessor of Isabella; he was the friend of Columbus. He introduced the latter to the Queen. The appeal to her in the name of humanity, of Christianity, of civilization, Isabella was unable to resist. Moreover, to her enlightened mind the theory of Columbus appeared reasonable. With characteristic caution, Ferdinand of Aragon shrunk from the enterprise; and Isabella undertook it for her own Castille and Leon. Her treasury had been heavily burdened by the expense of the Moorish war; but for the great enterprise of Columbus, she did not hesitate to pledge her crown-jewels.

We know the sequel; but how little do we appreciate at this day what that great enterprise meant at the time and under the circumstances in which it was accomplished. Accustomed as we now are to regard a voyage across the Atlantic in one of the floating palaces, propelled by forces of which even Columbus never dreamed, as no more than a mere holiday excursion, we can scarcely comprehend, much less appreciate, the difficulties that confronted the great navigator, and the sublimity of moral heroism required by that enter-

prise. No more heroic deed was ever done in all the annals of time. When Horatius held the Melvin Bridge against the overwhelming hosts of Lars Porsena, until the huge structure was cut away behind him, and he leaped into the boiling flood in all his armor clad and swam to the Roman shore; when Leonidas, at the narrow Pass of Thermopylæ, held the swarming myriads of Persia's King at bay, although he knew he must be overwhelmed at last; when the young republican, General Bonaparte, dashed into the fires of hell that were belched from Austria's hundred cannon on the Bridge of Lodi; when Lord Nelson hurled his ship against the hostile lines at Trafalgar, and perished as he did the deed, as he had anticipated; each and all of these had "the rapture of the strife" to sustain them that sometimes makes even cowards brave. But how superior to all this were the resolute purpose and the lofty inspiration that nerved the heart of "the world-seeking Genoese," when, on the morning of the 3d of August, in the year 1492, he entered upon that wonderful voyage that has never had parallel before or since; when he plunged into that unknown waste of waters that bounded the western shores of Europe in the apparently insane attempt to come out upon the eastern shores of Asia; when day after day, week after week, month after month, he sailed westward upon that unknown waste, with unswerving faith in his grand idea that never faltered, yet never had corroboration of its truth; when farther and farther he pushed into that trackless and mysterious ocean, in three frail vessels, to which now we would scarcely be willing to commit ourselves upon a peaceful inland river, with no human aid possible, no human heart nigh, no hope but in God above and his own great soul!

West—west—west—he went into the ever-growing waste of waters. West—west—west—and neither setting sun nor rising day gave promise of the fulfillment of his dream, that seemed from day to day more than ever a dream—yea, worse than a dream—a madman's fancy. He came into the Sargosso Sea, even yet mysterious with its wilderness of weeds; and the superstitious mariners regarded it as an ocean of the dead. West—west—west! Day rose and set, and rose again, and endless ocean yet rolled before them and around them. The spirit of mutiny grew in the hearts of his companions. They entreated their leader to return before it was too late. They murmured; they threatened; they were ready at last to rise in open revolt. Even the stout heart of Martin Alonzo Pinzon quailed, that had never known fear before. Columbus parleyed, negotiated, entreated. Amid all that wilderness of water, before that rising storm of mutiny, his faith never faltered; his soul never once lost sight of its grand purpose. But the storm was brewing around him, too powerful even for him to stem. At last, he bowed his head in sorrow, and promised to turn back in three days, if land were not then discovered. At the same time he ordered every sail set, and every rope strained, to push his vessels farther into the unknown West.

The night had come. The stars were up. The time limited for the performance of his promise was rapidly drawing to a close. Sad and thoughtful, the great Admiral stood on the deck of the Santa Maria, and peered wistfully into the darkness—and into the ages that were to come. Was it a fancy—that sudden flash of light that was gone almost before it was seen? Probably it was only the reflection of phosphorescent light from a brooding and overworked brain—a lightning flash, such as sometimes seems to pass before our physical vision,

when the mind has been greatly occupied with some dominant idea. The inspired soul of Columbus saw in that fitful gleam of light the signal that the "Indian Isles were nigh." He ordered the vessels to heave to for the night. Long, eventful, hopeful, yet almost painful night! At last the day dawned—the morning of the 12th of October, 1492—and the sun shone clear and bright on the island of San Salvador—brightest morning the world had ever known since first the stars sang on Creation's primal day, and the young earth went rejoicing through the firmament.

The goal was reached, the prize was won. The marvellous discovery was achieved—greater, far greater in its results than even Columbus had ever dreamed. The great enterprise was no longer a madman's fancy, but the realized inspiration of genius the most sublime. Cipango and Cathay, "the wealth of Ormus and Ind," were revealed to Europe. Oh, no! It was a new world that arose before them, although they knew it not—the continent of Montezuma and Atahualpa, the land that was to be of Bolivar and Washington.

We are told that the Norsemen had anticipated Columbus. So they had. There is but little doubt that those lurid buccaneers of the North seas had coasted the shores of Labrador, and probably those of Nova Scotia and New Foundland, three hundred years before Columbus crossed the ocean ; and it may be that they found their Vineland, where fashion and folly now find their choicest shrine, along the shores of Narragansett Bay, although this is rather improbable. But their discoveries were never utilized; there never was beneficial result of any kind from them; they proved absolutely nothing; and they had long been abandoned and utterly forgotten, if, indeed, they had ever been known beyond a few of the Norsemen themselves. And what have

they to do, after all, with the grand exploit of Columbus? The discovery of a new continent was only an incident in the great enterprise of Columbus—an incident, as it proved, of transcendant importance, and yet only an incident; and, as if to emphasize that circumstance, he not only lived and died in ignorance of the fact that he had discovered a new continent, but he was not permitted even to give that continent a name. The honor of naming it was appropriated by a more fortunate fellow-countryman. The achievement of Columbus was greatly broader than the discovery of a new continent. It revolutionized our system of geography and astronomy; it placed both for the first time on a solid basis of scientific truth. It taught us that our earth was a globe, and that it could be circumnavigated. It brought all the world into closer relationship, and laid it all open to the energetic enterprise of the Aryan nations. And best of all—and this it is which Columbus most dearly cherished—it gave a long-desired outlet to the manhood of Europe rudely compressed within the restraints of feudal slavery established throughout Europe by the kindred of those very Norsemen, with whose claim to priority of discovery it is sought to dim the glory of Columbus.

The mission of Columbus was not to ravage or plunder, to destroy or degrade, like the Cæsars and Napoleons who have strewn our earth with hostile bones. No enterprise ever undertaken or accomplished by man was more grandly conceived, or more beneficent in its ultimate results. Next to the Divine Founder of Christianity and to the divinely commissioned leader of the Exodus of Israel, Christopher Columbus has proved to be the greatest benefactor the world has ever had. For to the success of his enterprise is directly due the fact that the oppressed people of Europe were enabled at last to

escape from the galling fetters of Feudalism against which they had struggled so long and almost so hopelessly, and to find in the New World a home for civil liberty where the true principles of human freedom could be securely nurtured, and from which they could be made to react upon Europe. Our American freedom is not merely the sequel; it is the legitimate result of the heroic struggles of Christopher Columbus. And now that our principles of civil liberty have shattered the thrones of the military despots of Europe, and compelled the bigoted feudal monarchies of the Old World to yield to the aspirations of their peoples striving to be free, we may well question whether that result would ever have been possible without the splendid achievement of the great republican navigator. It is true it has required three hundred years for the cause to produce its full effect. So it required three hundred years from the time when the Galilean fishermen went forth from Jerusalem on their wonderful mission, for the spirit of Christianity to permeate the Roman world. But the Roman world awoke one morning, at the end of the three centuries, to find itself Christian. Three centuries after Columbus, thanks to him, the world awakes to find itself republican.

It has been sought to detract from the fame of Columbus by evidence that he was querulous, petulant, selfish, egotistical, unchaste, and even unjust. And it is greatly to be regretted that the learned historian of Cambridge has led in this movement. Fortunately, thus far he is a leader without followers. *Columbus was human.* So was George Washington. So was Godfrey of Bouillon. So was Epaminondas. So were all the great and good men whose efforts have been directed to the exaltation of our common humanity. What might future generations think of George Wash-

ington if some literary ghoul of the Winsor school of history should resurrect the almost forgotten lampoons of Philip Frenau, and pass them off as credible contemporary documents? Or, how might Abraham Lincoln stand in history if his true character were to be gleaned from some of the veracious daily chroniclers of the events of his own time? The demigod of our fancies has never yet existed, except in our fancies. It is no reason that, because a man has weaknesses, he may not be a hero. Indeed, the most heroic soul is that which combines the resolute effort of superhuman will with the tender softness of woman; and hence it is, perhaps that acts of heroism are more frequent with women than with men, although probably less connected with continuous purpose. Great deeds done have all been done by men like the rest of us. To the *valet de chambre*—so the cynical French proverb says—no man is a hero. Let us leave to the *valet de chambre* the details of the weaknesses that prove our heroes to be men.

We are engaged as a nation—celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of the great enterprise. On the 17th of April, just four hundred years ago, Columbus received his commission from the hands of Queen Isabella. On the 12th of next October, when four hundred years will have elapsed from that fateful morning on which the little sentinel island of San Salvador, standing at the portals of the New World, was revealed to the astonished gaze of Europe, the triumph of peace, the triumph of the world's art, the triumph of humanity, will be signalized in the Great City of our inland waters with the strains of mighty music and a hymn of praise from the pen of one of America's fairest and most gifted daughters, worthiest tribute a great nation and the great heart of humanity

could pay to the hero who had made that nation possible and lifted humanity out of the slough of feudal despond. Would it not be a fitting adjunct that our National Legislature should now and for all time decree the day to be a National holiday?

Columba, the dove, brooding over the primeval chaos of waters, is the symbol of the Creative Power in Genesis, when the earth emerged from the primordial formative process into a condition fit for human habitation. *Columba, the dove*, was the harbinger of the subsidence of the waters and of the rediscovery of the land, when the Noachian Deluge had overwhelmed the corrupt civilization of an earlier world. *Columba, the dove*, hovered over the waters of the Jordan when Jesus of Nazareth prepared himself by baptism in its stream for his divine mission to renovate the world. It is a curious coincidence that the symbolic name should have been borne by the man destined by Providence to manifest to Europe the New World of America, to provide for Freedom a home, for humanity its noblest destiny.